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BUYING TEXTILES AND CLOTHING IN THE MODERN MANNER

A radio talk by Ruth O'Brien, Division of Textiles and Clothing, Bureau of Home Economics, broadcast Wednesday, February 3, 1937, in the home demonstration program, National Farm and Home Hour, by WMAE and 56 other stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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Good-afternoon, homemakers.

When I was asked to talk to you on the subject "Buying textiles and clothing in the modern manner," I began to wonder just what this "modern manner" really is, anyway. What does this phrase mean, especially as applied to buying?

Well, certainly, doing our purchasing in a business-like way is at least one evidence of the modern manner. Every place we go now-a-days, we hear women talking of budgets and household accounts - and some even talk glibly of price trends and glutted markets and other high-sounding economic things.

Then too, a great many of them seem to know how various commercial products are made and what they are made of. And they are alert to add to their store of information. They want to be even more business-like in their buying. That is especially true as regards household textiles and clothing. We get many letters here at the Bureau of Home Economics that illustrate this.

Just the other day we had one from a woman up in New Jersey. She listed a number of trade names for fabrics and asked these questions: "What are these materials? How can I tell them from each other and from silk when I am buying dresses?"

We could answer her first question. That is, we could tell her what manufacturers have copyrighted those names and what their products are made out of. But unfortunately no one could answer the second question. No one could tell her how to distinguish these fabrics from one another at the counter. The tests necessary for this are far too complicated to be made at home. They require the equipment of a testing laboratory.

That letter emphasizes one thing consumers everywhere are asking - that is, the kind of fibers used to make the fabrics now offered on the retail counter. And it is reasonable that we consumers should want this information. We are entitled to it.

For instance, if I pay a fair price for an all-wool blanket, I want to know that I am getting all wool and not part cotton.

Or, if I am buying a silk dress, I want to know if it is actually silk, or if it is largely tin weighting, or some other fiber like rayon or cotton. Not only must I know this in order to judge if the price is fair, but also in order to know what kind of service I can expect from the dress, and how I should care for it so as to make it last as long as possible.

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Shrinkage is another thing many consumers ask about. We have all of us had the experience of buying a dress which seemed to be made of good firm material. But when it was washed or drycleaned it shrank until it was about the size of a pen wiper. You can't tell how much a fabric will shrink merely by looking at it, any more than you can tell what kind of fiber it is made of.

And the same thing is true of color fastness. We used to think that certain colors were more fast than others. I believe it was the lavenders and greens that were in ill repute. Well, that is just a myth. It is not the colors but the dyes used to produce the colors, that are fast or fugitive. And neither you nor I nor anyone can tell just by looking at a fabric what dye was used on it and whether it is fast.

No, all of these things - kind of fiber, shrinkage, and color fastness - are as much hidden from us as though the fabric were sealed up in a package or in a tin can. That's the reason many people are urging that every fabric and every garment carry an informative label.

Now-a-days, almost everything we buy has some kind of a label on it. Unfortunately, all too often these labels give us very few facts. They are likely to tell the trade name but this may or may not mean much to the purchaser. Or they may carry some general statement like "guaranteed by so-and-so". But this merely makes us wonder "guaranteed for what?" Or perhaps the label says "Approved by so-and-so." And again we wonder who is so-and-so, and what does he base his approval on. Such labels can hardly be called "informative."

I don't mean to imply that there are no labels that give helpful information. I saw one the other day on a blanket that did tell something. To begin with, it said the blanket was all wool. Then it went on to give the size, the weight, the number of pounds pull that would be required to tear it, and the heat transmission - that is, the warmth of the blanket. If every blanket in the store were labeled like that, we wouldn't have to waste so much of our time and the clerk's time trying to find one that fits our needs and our pocketbook.

And here's another good example. I have in my office a label which came on a suit of underwear. It carries this definite statement, "This garment will not shrink more than 2%." That's a lot more helpful than a label with some of those indefinite words like "pre-shrunk," "natural shrunk," or "super-shrunk." Who knows what such words mean? At the best, they can only indicate that the fabric has been put through some kind of a shrinking process. They do not tell us how much more the material will shrink. No, I like definite statements that really tell us something.

And I'm optimistic enough to believe that as time goes on we will have less and less of the indefinite kind of label and more of the truly informative ones on the textiles and ready-made garments sold in the retail stores.

And, by the way, have you noticed the increased number of facts the mailorder catalogs give these days? And may I ask also, have you really used the information you have found in these catalogs and on the labels in the retail stores? That is buying in the modern manner. For after all, we as consumers, must do our part if the distributors do theirs. We must read the facts they give us; we must learn the meaning of the terms used; and we must buy with these facts in mind. No one else can do such things for us.

I am reminded of a conversation a friend of mine overheard in a department store recently. A woman read a label on a piece of material and remarked enthusiastically to her companion, "Oh, look here. Here is a new invention. This label says this material is anti-grease. It must mean the fabric will not show grease spots."

Unfortunately, the poor lady was not using her eyes. The label said "Anti-crease." It was on one of the new fabrics finished so that it would not wrinkle readily.

She was not buying in the modern manner. For the modern manner assumes that we will read labels carefully and intelligently and make full use of the information they give us.



